

## **C and G News**

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### **'Intense' entrepreneurial program prepares prospective business owners –**

By Cortney Casey  
C & G Staff Writer

Debbie Heuchert was already six years into operating her own store when she sought further business plan guidance through the FastTrac New Venture Entrepreneurial Training program last fall.

“One of the first things they said to us was, ‘What is your exit plan?’ I looked at the person next to me and said, ‘Death?’” laughed Heuchert, owner of Champagne Chocolates in Mount Clemens. “I really do wish I would have taken the class before I actually did a brick-and-mortar business.”

“Intense” is how Susan Bates would summarize FastTrac, but she considers it a necessary baptism by fire for anyone contemplating taking the leap into business establishment and ownership.

“It’s a lot of work,” said Bates, a business consultant for the Macomb County Small Business & Technology Development Center. “It’s to get entrepreneurs really thinking about their business and their idea, and they come out of the class with a business plan.”

The next session of the 10-week course — put on by the Macomb County SBTDC and sponsored by the Macomb County Department of Planning and Economic Development — runs 9 a.m.-12:30 p.m. on Mondays, Sept. 12-Nov. 21, at the Macomb-Oakland University INCubator in Sterling Heights.

The registration fee of \$140 is reimbursed to students who successfully complete the course’s requirements, which include attending at least eight of 10 sessions, preparing a business plan and giving a presentation during the final class, said Don Morandini, regional director for the Macomb County SBTDC.

The fee has been reduced from \$700, thanks to a Michigan State University Broadband Technology Opportunity Program grant; the class also is funded in part by the Small Business Administration.

This represents the first time the INCubator will host the training, previously held at the Macomb County Administration Building.

“This is the fifth one that we have done,” said Bates. “Usually, we’ll do two a year, depending on demand ... one in the spring and one in the fall.”

Anyone dreaming of launching a for-profit endeavor — or those, like Heuchert, who have established businesses but feel they're failing to reach their full potential — is welcome to enroll, she said.

The class covers “everything from the concept through to the financials and everything in between,” she said, with attendees researching how to implement their ideas, the specifics of their industry, the current trends and who their customers will be before moving on to marketing plans.

Heuchert said she and fellow students learned about topics ranging from licensing and permits to deciding which products to sell to pricing them properly.

The course differs from typical trainings because it augments education and instruction with a support network that helps carry participants through to actual implementation, said Morandini.

“Often people take a class, and then when the class finishes, they're like, ‘What do I do now? Where do I go now?’” he said.

Guest speakers visit weekly to share their own entrepreneurship adventures, so participants “can hear from those who have been where they were and have successfully navigated those challenges,” said Morandini.

The instructors also bring in local businesspeople for the last class to help evaluate participants' final presentations, he added.

Getting feedback from fellow students and hearing from people who'd been there, done that, was invaluable, said Heuchert, who called the course “an eye-opening experience.”

She launched Champagne Chocolates out of the basement of her Macomb Township home in 1990 and opened her store on Cherry Street in Mount Clemens in 2004.

But had she completed FastTrac beforehand, and had Michigan's recently adopted cottage food law — which allows residents to sell certain foods prepared in their homes — existed then, “I don't know what my decision would have been,” she said. “So many times, I look back, and I'm thinking, ‘Geez, I don't know if I would have ventured out of my house.’”

Ultimately, Heuchert said, she probably still would have acquired a storefront — which she said has been a great experience — but might have gone about the whole endeavor in a “smarter” way.

Heuchert purchased business plan software when she was starting out, but a “canned program,” as she called it, “doesn't even touch what you learn in class,” she said. “It doesn't even come close to the tools that they give you to write your business plan.

“(FastTrac) makes you aware of things that you normally wouldn't think about, down to the smallest detail,” she added. “They give you the questions that you should already have answered.”

Bates said other FastTrac graduates' responses have been similar to Heuchert's, declaring the program rigorous but worthwhile.

"A lot of people tend to get very overwhelmed, which is very normal," said Bates. "I would say one, it's a lot of work, but two, I have not had one person ever regret it. It really opens their eyes."

For more information or to register for FastTrac, contact Bates at (586) 469-5118 or [susan.bates@macombcountymi.gov](mailto:susan.bates@macombcountymi.gov) . The registration deadline is Aug. 26; space is limited. There is no class Oct. 10.

The Macomb-OU INCubator is located at 6633 18 Mile Road, east of Mound, in Sterling Heights.

For more information on the Macomb County SBTDC, visit [http://www.macombcountymi.gov/BusinessDevelopment/small\\_business/index.html](http://www.macombcountymi.gov/BusinessDevelopment/small_business/index.html) .